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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 002181

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP; RIYADH PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR GOLDRICH

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TAGS: PGOV SCUL SOCI KISL

SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT OF STUDENT OPINION: UNDERGRADS FROM JEDDAH COLLEGE CRITICIZE SAG/USG

Classified By: ACTING CONSUL GENERAL CAROL KALIN  
FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

**¶11. (C) SUMMARY.** Following the June 28 opening of the first American Corner in Saudi Arabia at the College of Business Administration (CBA) in Jeddah, Conoff accompanied a group of CBA undergraduates and their student advisor on a June 30 hiking trip to the mountains near Mecca. In discussions during the trip, the young men were critical of the SAG. The students, who had little or no direct exposure to the U.S., also criticized U.S. involvement in Iraq and the state of moral values in the U.S. END SUMMARY.

STUDENTS CRITICIZE SAUDI AND ARAB LEADERS

**¶12. (C)** On June 30, Conoff accompanied a group of CBA students and their student advisor on a hiking trip to Hada Mountain, located between Mecca and Taif. According to the student advisor, the trips are designed to teach the young men values that will assist them in life after graduation. The theme of a recent trip to the beaches north of Jeddah was "Resisting the temptations of women." This trip was designed to teach the young men leadership values in completing the challenge of exploring Hada Mountain as a team.

**¶13. (C)** In discussions throughout the day, the students criticized the SAG and other Arab governments. The students mocked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and stated that "animals live better than people in Syria." When asked to affirm that the situation in Saudi Arabia was better than Syria, a young man originally from the Nejd (Riyadh) region shook his head and replied, "so, so- The situation here is medium."

**¶14. (C)** Criticizing corruption among Saudi princes, one student described a telemarketing fraud scheme selling fake calling cards which allegedly involved a son of King Fahd. Another repeated the widely-held belief that the popular Jeddah "Al Baik" restaurant chain was prevented from opening in Riyadh due to a prince's concern that the restaurant would compete with his franchises. While driving past a poster in Taif with pictures of members of the royal family welcoming visitors to the city, the student advisor sarcastically stated that the king and princes "do not even come here. They spend all their time in Europe, like in Geneva." Referring to the royal family, he stated, "When you have a lot, you want even more; you cannot see the limit."

STUDENTS QUESTION U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ, MORAL VALUES IN U.S.

**¶15. (C)** The students, who had little or no direct exposure to the U.S., consistently praised the American people. "Whenever I meet an American guy, he is very nice," one student stated. The students also asked questions about prominent Arab-Americans, such as General John Abizaid, and played American popular and rap music on the drive to the mountain.

**¶16. (C)** When the discussion turned to politics, however, the students were critical of U.S. involvement in Iraq and the allegations of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison. When reminded that the U.S. military investigated and prosecuted members of the military involved in events at Abu Ghraib, one student stated his approval and observed "that (prosecution of those involved in torture) would never happen in Saudi Arabia." However, he added that the prosecutions would not help America's image in the Arab world because "the damage is done." Pointing to his friend, one student said, "tell him (Conoff) what you said about America yesterday." The young man replied, "I prefer not to talk about politics or Iraq."

**¶17. (C)** The students reserved much of their discussion on the U.S. for the subject of moral values. During the drive to the mountain, the young men stopped at a local mosque at afternoon prayer time, and later found a mountainside mosque to perform the evening "isha" prayers. Following prayers, one student mentioned the subject of gay marriage and criticized the U.S. for even considering the matter. Citing the cool mountain weather, another young man asked if Americans in the northern U.S. stayed warm because "they drink alcohol all day." Several criticized abuse of alcohol

and drugs as the major factors behind perceived high crime rates in Western countries.

18. (C) At the end of the day, the student advisor spoke to the group and reminded them to think about the teamwork and leadership they had exhibited in exploring the mountain. "Even from wrong decisions, you can still make the right decisions," he said. Speaking with Conoff, he concluded "I want these guys to think for themselves, take care of each other, and remember that anything is possible in any country." KALIN